

Starving for Justice: Bangladeshi Garment Workers in a 'Post-Rana Plaza' World

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The Factory as (Temporary) Refuge

On the afternoon of August 2, 2014, I walked into Hossain Market, one of the many nondescript multistoried buildings lining the commercial thoroughfare in Uttor Badda, Dhaka. I had gone to show solidarity with hunger-striking garment workers of the Toba Group, three of whose units were housed in the building. Since July 28, several hundred workers had occupied the upper floors, demanding payment of three months back wages, overtime, and a festival bonus. The market entrance looked deserted, not exactly the hotbed of industrial action I'd expected. "Is this where the strike is?" I asked no one in particular. A couple of young women immediately escorted me up several flights of stairs – past the inevitable collapsible gates and oversized padlocks adorning each floor. On the seventh floor landing, young student volunteers were buzzing around a media and communications desk they had set up. Inside, I found half a dozen workers sprawled across cutting tables and makeshift beds, being administered saline by a medical team provided by a well-known health rights NGO. Hundreds of others, mostly women but also some men, milled across the room. Before I could speak to the workers, Shahidul Islam Shabuj, a labor organizer and sometime acquaintance, spied me from a distance and whisked me away to the top floor for an audience with Moshrefa Mishu, president of the Garment Workers Unity Forum and the prime mover behind the "fast unto death." For Shabuj, my presence was fortuitous—an opportunity to get the workers' formal message out.

Upstairs, inside the managing director's office, a slew of younger female labor leaders, as well as a young *mofussil* lawyer, had come to "pay their respects" to Mishu and show support for the strike. They came forward, ritually handing over their business cards, eager to be acknowledged (or perhaps blessed) by the veteran Left organizer. The symbolic occupation of the MD's office by Mishu and her co-organizers seemed only to add to their sense of awe. As we waited for Mishu to speak, a confident young woman introduced herself to me. I had last seen Lovely Yeasmin when she was the slightly hesitant teenaged coordinator of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Union Federation (BIGUF), an AFL-CIO supported group to which she no longer belongs.

Mishu told her story with a quiet resolve, with occasional enthusiastic interjections from two young male workers in their early twenties. The staff of five factories owned by the Toba Group—1,600 workers—had not been paid,

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ostensibly because a co-owner, Delwar Hossain, was in jail. Hossain had been the managing director of Tazreen fashions; he was facing charges related to the deadly fire that had killed more than 100 workers in November 2012. Despite his imprisonment since February, the Toba group secured a major contract to supply officially licensed jerseys for the World Cup games in Brazil. Indeed, the Brazil contract was widely publicized and a source of considerable nationalist pride—for many middle-class Bangladeshis, this represented participation in a glamorous sporting event otherwise closed to the nation. In contrast, for the two male sewing operators in that room, (the memory of producing) those jerseys appeared to be literal, material signifiers of their deprivations and grievances—an invisible measure of the distance between the purported pleasures of world-class football and their own micro-struggles on the shop floor. They “gifted” me packaging left over from the WC order, as well as Xeroxes of the company’s most recent financial statements: “proof” of their embodied labor and the owners’ prevarications about profits and ability to pay.

The Toba story sounded depressingly familiar in its outlines, for Bangladeshi garment factories are notorious for not paying workers on time. Two factors stood out: first, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers’ Association (BGMEA), the influential self-regulating trade body, was directly involved from the outset in negotiating back wages. Toba workers had earlier *gheraoed* (encircled) the gleaming BGMEA headquarters demanding arrears, to no avail. Workers had also received written and oral assurances they would be paid by Eid. Second, several registered unions, established in the wake of the amended labor law of 2013, represented the workers in what turned out to be failed negotiations. In an absurd twist, Delwar Hossain received bail just before Eid. Bail was granted with full government blessings, on the grounds that this would hasten worker payments.

The trope of starvation—of bodily deprivation—marked worker narratives that afternoon. The night before the Eid holidays, once it was clear the BGMEA would once again renege on its promise to pay, the decision to fast made “bodily sense” to the organizers. Not being paid for three months meant workers were already, irredeemably, malnourished as they rushed, working overtime, to complete orders before the World Cup began. From that perspective, the hunger strike was not a desperate gambit. It merely formalized and rendered more meaningful the structural violence that shaped everyday living. To declare a hunger strike—*amoron anoshon*—was to make visible, re-center, and so transform the meanings of the quotidian practices of otherwise marginal subjects. If they were going to starve, I was told, they might as well starve for justice.

Of the many things Mishu spoke of that afternoon, her insistence that the factory was the safest place for these unpaid workers struck me the most forcefully. Such a claim sounded counterintuitive, if not preposterous, given the safety record of Bangladeshi factories. But three months of arrears meant three months of unpaid rent, piling store credits, and school fees. A well-founded fear of harassment by landlords and other creditors prevented workers from

returning home that night before Eid; journeying to their village homes to escape or to celebrate the holidays was not an option because of the costs involved. Given the circumstances, the factory provided the desperate workers with the only refuge they had. “They are here, protecting their machines, because the machines are their livelihood,” said Mishu. The machines, she wanted to say, were in safe custody.

The hunger strike caught the imagination of the public in a way other, earlier industrial actions had not. The *Toba Group Sramik Songram Committee*, an alliance of eleven Left-leaning organizations, held a series of sit-ins in front of Hossain Market; women’s groups and “civil society” representatives organized press conferences and protests. For a fleeting moment, this seemed to be a turning point in labor activism in the country. The images coming out of this strike were nothing like the standard gendered representations of worker protests in the popular media. This was not a “rampaging mob” of dissatisfied male workers bent on vandalizing the means of production on which they depended, but mothers with young children and brothers with families to support, desperately demanding their *paona* or dues.

Just days later, the “deep state”¹ swung into action. More accurately, the alliance of state and capital, always intimate, reached a new and more transparent level. Police—in conjunction with “local goons”—cordoned off Hossain Market and barred all entry into the premises. Over the course of several hours, they forced medical and other personnel to leave, locking workers in. At one stage, the authorities refused to let in urgent medical supplies, leaving hunger strikers in a highly vulnerable situation. Female police officers in formal regalia—batons, shields, and helmets—along with male henchmen alleged to belong to the ruling party, brutally beat up workers and others present, including a female university professor and a number of Left activists. Moshrefa Mishu and others were briefly arrested. The BGMEA announced it would pay two months’ salary immediately and the remainder within a week. Workers’ representatives refused the offer; eventually, most workers were compelled to collect what wages they could.

The violent storming of the hunger strike at Hossain Market did not garner widespread media coverage globally. Yet the unfolding of events during the hunger strike, I suggest, offers valuable insights into the state of labor organizing and workers’ rights in the wake of the Rana Plaza disaster and the global attention lavished on the Bangladeshi garment industry since then.

Rana Plaza: A Twenty-first Century Triangle Shirtwaist Disaster?

The collapse of Rana Plaza on April 24, 2013 in Savar, Bangladesh in which more than 1,100 workers were killed, numerous others maimed for life, and the livelihoods of several thousand workers destroyed, catapulted the modern “sweatshop” into global headlines. The worst industrial disaster in the history of the global garment industry, Rana Plaza opened up debates on responsibility and accountability in transnational production processes.

From the outset, the desire to read the Rana Plaza collapse, coming on the heels of the Tazreen fire, as a watershed moment, a game-changer, and catalyst along the lines of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911, has been strong. Comparisons to the 1911 incident seemed to come almost naturally.² Scenes of young, mostly female workers, locked inside factory premises, jumping to their deaths in a desperate bid to save their lives cannot but recall an earlier “tragedy” in the history of the garment industry. Despite the visual similarities generated by combining the Tazreen fire deaths with the Rana Plaza collapse, the analogy is counterproductive, if not dangerous.

The global economy in which New York factories were embedded in the early 1900s was quite different from the conditions that enabled Dhaka’s garment factories to flourish a century later. The aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire was a domestic *localized* process—one that took place within a broader environment of socialist radicalism. It bears recalling that this was not only a moment of great ferment in the grassroots labor movement in the United States but also one in which questions of the rights of labor versus capital were at the forefront of national and international debates.

The stakes for striking or demanding regulation were equally high but they were different and contained firmly *within* national borders. In the intervening years, with the rise of the so-called global factory and the search for lower labor costs internationally, the scale of the commodity chain has become much more complex. Multiple transnational actors are now involved in the garment industry, all operating in a decidedly neoliberal discursive environment. The many layers of globalized subcontracting, the incorporation of local petty commodity production and home-based workers as well as factory workers across national boundaries, and new networks between producers and consumers, render any easy comparisons moot. The “sweatshop” itself has become a rejuvenated site of transnational activism, alliances, and solidarity among groups as diverse as university students, fashion models, and consumers, as well as workers’ rights organizations.³

Questions of accountability and responsibility, of “reform,” have been rendered correspondingly complex. Today, changes in capitalist production processes and the mediatization of everyday social landscapes inform decisions by factory owners, Euro-American buyers, Southern governments, workers, and transnational labor activists.⁴

Finally, a literal comparison between two events separated by a century has the effect of placing Bangladesh in an economic past that the US appears to have, by implication, experienced and moved beyond. This evolutionary, stagist and Orientalizing framing denies coevalness; it suggests the Bangladeshi garment industry and its workers are backward and less mature, literally out of time. In the process, the global capitalist system in which the industry is embedded is effectively depoliticized. Industrial disasters and subsequent legal reform can be recast as a necessary phase in capitalist growth, one that more “mature” economies have traversed and left behind. The foundational violence of capitalism can simply be disavowed.

It may be stating the obvious, but any report “from the field” must be contextualized; in this case, through a close analysis of the global economy in which Bangladeshi garment workers’ lives are intimately entangled—the transnational connections and conjunctures, as well as the driving narratives through which we understand the events in question.

The Ethical Global Gaze

Whatever its long term consequences, in the immediate aftermath of the Rana Plaza incident, public debates in the global North turned firmly on questions of ethical sourcing, transparency, and accountability in the production chain. Among other things, recalibrating the reputation of Euro-American retailers became an urgent task. Just three weeks after the Rana Plaza collapse, a number of (primarily European) retailers signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. Hailed by many around the world as a significant turning point in the struggle for labor rights, the Accord calls for independent inspection and remediation of Bangladeshi manufacturing units used by its signatories for a period of five years. With nearly 150 retailers and brands signed up, the Accord builds on the Bangladesh government’s National Action Plan on Fire Safety and “welcomes a strong role” for the International Labor Organization (ILO). The legally binding nature of the financial and other commitments of the Accord is said to have prompted US retailers such as Gap and Walmart to put together a competing agreement, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, in July 2013. Both the Accord and the Alliance have the mandate to recommend closure of factories deemed unsafe, until appropriate repairs are undertaken.

The differences between the Accord and the Alliance have been parsed at length by US-based activists and academics, who overwhelmingly tend to privilege the former. In April 2014, the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights at NYU issued a report entitled *Business as Usual is Not an Option: Supply Chains and Sourcing after Rana Plaza*. The Stern report raised a firestorm primarily for minimizing Accord/Alliance differences, for its apparent bias toward retailers, and for misstatements on key provisions of the Accord. The global union IndustriAll, a signatory to the Accord, responded with a critique. A coalition of over 100 US-based academics signed an open letter to the authors of the Stern report.

It is worth asking why a report produced by a US business school should generate this kind of response. What are the circuits through which a report like this travels? What kind of power does this attention index? Inside Bangladesh, few people are aware of the Stern School initiative. In fact, there are hardly any debates on the merits of the Accord and the Alliance.

On the contrary, some voices on the Left express discomfort with the emergence and supranational power of international private sector inspection bodies operating with evident ease in a supposedly sovereign nation state. “What are

the implications of US and European retailers having the power to close down factories they deem unsafe? To whom are they accountable?” asks Taslima Akter, award-winning photographer and coordinator of the labor advocacy group, *Garments Sromik Shonghoti*. Nazneen Shifa, a member of the Activist Anthropologists—a group working with survivors of Tazreen and Rana Plaza, is similarly wary. Other progressive voices insist the emphasis on the global production chain masks both the enormous profits and the culpability of Bangladeshi factory owners. In this view, a Walmart or Primark is not nearly as culpable as factory owners who have made millions from the sweat of garment workers. Such are the paradoxes of transnational positionality.

To date the Accord-Alliance combine has inspected over 1,100 factories. Ten have been fully closed down. Resistance has come from predictable sources—factory owners—as well from workers themselves. The Accord legally binds brands to ensure that workers are paid during factory closures. However, according to a spokesperson for IndustriAll, “the detail on who would make payments had been left open in order to ensure that all those factory owners who could afford to pay for repairs and compensation for workers made the necessary contribution.”⁵ While such details are negotiated, workers in factories declared unsafe pay a different price. “Starvation through unemployment or the danger of death, this is not a choice” is how workers laid off from factories closed down by Accord/Alliance inspectors, voice their dilemma.⁶

Between the Spectacular and the Everyday

The Stern School report may well gloss over crucial differences between the Accord and the Alliance. Yet, albeit inadvertently, *Business as Usual* points to the limits of the Alliance/Accord mandate. The report maps out in considerable detail the global production chain for the kind of cheap garments produced in Bangladesh, thereby highlighting the relationship between sourcing practices based on the demand for “fast fashion” and coercive labor practices on the shop floor. Read against the grain, the report gives a good sense of how the spectacular (the collapse of Rana Plaza) is intimately tied to the everyday (extremely short lead times, the compulsion to work against one’s better judgment, a financial structure in which payment is invariably outstanding, the threat to withhold payment) and how the latter has as much to do with the deaths of Rana Plaza as faulty infrastructure. To say that impossibly short lead times enable conditions of coercion is not to absolve factory owners and managers of responsibility, of course.

The Rana Plaza incident recalls and complicates Melissa Wright’s analysis of the apparel export industry along the Mexican-American border and in China.⁷ Wright unpacks the processes through which the myth of essentially disposable Third World women’s labor and bodies are produced. Arguably, Bangladeshi workers’ bodies are rendered into “waste” in the process of contemporary capital accumulation. I would venture to suggest, however, that in the emergent hypermediatized discourse of ethical production and

consumption today, there is no place for *visibly* disposable bodies. The deaths at Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions were unacceptable precisely for making visible the violent underbelly of transnational capital and rendering legible the violence that binds consuming bodies in the Global North with producing bodies in places like Bangladesh.

*International Labor Solidarity or Neoliberal Transnational Organizing?
Brief Notes on the Search for Authenticity*

A key difference between the Accord and the Alliance is that the former includes national and international unions. The agreement stipulates that workers are to be included in inspections and have the right to refuse to unsafe work. Notwithstanding this important provision, the conditions that generated the Toba Group strike were simply beyond the Accord-Alliance mandate. In fact, in the eyes of striking Toba workers, the four registered unions and their flamboyant labor leader, Nazma Akter (no relation to Kalpona), who had negotiated on their behalf, did not simply lose credibility. For them, the failed talks revealed Nazma's true status—as a *dadal* or agent of the BGMEA.

Who speaks for Bangladeshi garment workers? This fraught question does not lend itself to definitive answers. Amendments to the labor law and the signing of the Accord produced important changes. According to an ILO report from February 2014, ninety-six new trade unions had been registered in the garment sector in 2013 alone, bringing the total number of registered unions to 222.⁸ A large number of these recently registered unions are affiliated with the Washington, DC-based, AFL-CIO-supported Solidarity Center. The actual power of these new factory based trade unions has yet to be determined. It would be incorrect to assume, however, that labor organizing was absent before the emergence of the Accord and various global pressures on the government of Bangladesh. Numerous federations have long vied for influence in the garment sector, although contemporary global narratives minimized their significance. Local progressive intellectuals often dismiss the federations as too politicized to count as “real” unions.

From one perspective, supporting the Accord is fundamental to supporting workers' rights in Bangladesh. A key difference between the Accord and the Alliance is that the former includes national and international unions. The agreement stipulates that workers are to be included in inspections and have the right to refuse unsafe work. Notwithstanding this important provision, the conditions that generated the Toba Group strike were simply beyond the Accord-Alliance mandate. In fact, in the eyes of striking Toba workers, the four registered unions and their flamboyant labor leader, Nazma Akter (no relation to Kalpona), who had negotiated presumably in good faith on their behalf, did not simply lose credibility. For them, the failed talks revealed Nazma's true status—as a *dadal* or agent of the BGMEA.⁹

A new class of (sometimes reluctant) cosmopolitan labor organizers has emerged in line with the advocacy and lobbying requirements of contemporary transnational production chains.¹⁰ Their work articulates directly to a specific global circuit in which Bangladeshi worker interests are transnationalized. The NGO Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), and its charismatic Executive Director Kalpona Akhter, is among the best known. A former garment worker, Kalpona is an articulate spokesperson for Bangladeshi workers' rights. The unsolved 2012 murder of Kalpona's colleague, Aminul Islam, widely reported in the global press appeared to signal the dangers of organizing in the garment industry.¹¹ Kalpona, who speaks fluent English, is a frequent traveler to the United States, where most recently she testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on labor rights (in relation to the 2013 US suspension of Generalized Special Preferences to the country).

Members of the Activists Anthropologists group, a loose coalition of academics concerned with social justice, consciously operate at a remove from such transnational circuits. That is, they refuse on principle to involve themselves in international connections that they feel either compromise national economic sovereignty or lead to complicity with capitalist structures of domination. In the last few years, they have worked directly with survivors (and their families) of Tazreen and Rana Plaza. Often dogged in their pursuit of justice, they have organized some of the most creative forms of resistance to capital (including flash mobs and a "die-in," a literal invasion of the space of the BGMEA, its glittering multistory headquarters). Taslima Akter, whose haunting photograph of an embracing couple in the ruins of Rana Plaza became iconic of the event, is a longtime Left activist who has set up a solidarity organization for garment workers. Both the Activist Anthropologists and Taslima Akter view the "Nazma Akters" of the world with profound suspicion.

To ask where international labor solidarity ends and neoliberal transnational governmentality begins may be to miss the point. The Rana Plaza collapse has enabled the emergence of new niches for labor activism and advocacy. In the spaces that have opened up, multiple actors jostle to represent the authentic voice or interest of the garment worker, usually working within a spectrum of established ideological repertoires. The question of what it takes to represent workers remains open.

What of the workers at the Toba Group who risked so much for the right to be paid for labor/value that had already been extracted from their bodies? Moshrefa Mishu is back on the streets demanding justice for Toba workers, who are still owed one full month's wage and a bonus. Those who survived Tazreen and Rana Plaza are still awaiting compensation.

NOTES

1. Here I use "deep state" as a "short hand for the embedded anti-democratic power structures within a government;" irrespective of what party is in power. See "What is the Deep

State?" in *On Religion*, July 4, 2013. <http://www.onreligion.co.uk/what-is-the-deep-state/>. Accessed June 3, 2015.

2. Thus, on the 2014 anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, Hunter College organized a forum entitled *From Triangle Shirtwaist to Bangladesh: The Garment Industry, Tragedy and Workplace Safety Reform* at which I was asked to speak. The event, which brought together US labor historians as well as activists, was productive and revealing. It proved to be difficult to transcend the implicitly evolutionary framing inscribed in the terms of debate. The conversation is online. [<http://www.roosevelthouse.hunter.cuny.edu/events/triangle-shirtwaist-bangladesh-garment-industry-tragedy-workplace-safety-reform/>] (accessed 6/22/2015)]Roosevelt House, Hunter College, CUNY. New York, March 25.

3. In this regard, the schedule laid out for Bangladeshi labor organizer Kalpana Akter, on a tour of the US, last October, is instructive. In the course of one week, Ms. Akter traveled to Walmart's headquarters to address their Board, lectured at a conference in New York organized by South Asian leftists, consulted with fashion models eager to promote ethical sourcing during New York's fashion week, and picketed GAP stores in the city.

4. For an analysis of how the retailer American Apparel used the Rana Plaza collapse to promote its Made in the USA clothing label, see Dina M Siddiqi "Solidarity, Sexuality and Saving Muslim Women in Neoliberal Times" in *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol 42, No. 3-4, Fall/Winter 2014.

5. Sarah Butler, "Bangladesh factory owners threaten inspection agencies with legal action." *The Guardian*, May 26, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/26/bangladesh-clothing-factory-safety-agreement-compensation-closures> (accessed 1/13/2015)

6. Taslima Akter, personal communication.

7. Melissa W. Wright *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. Routledge, 2006.

8. International Labour Organization. *Union Registrations Rise Sharply in Bangladesh: New Labor Laws Pave Way to Improve Conditions, Workers' Rights*. http://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Informationresources/Publicinformation/Pressreleases/WCMS_236042/lang-en/index.htm (accessed 1/13/2015).

9. This is an ironic position for Nazma Akhter to inhabit today. Along with Lovely Yeasmin, she was a leading member of BIGUF when it was first set up in the early 1990s. Like Yeasmin, she too left to start her own organization, the Awaaj Foundation. At the time, she told me she was frustrated with BIGUF priorities which she felt were set by people in Washington, not by the needs of workers in Bangladesh. For more on Nazma Akhter, see Dina M Siddiqi, "Do Bangladesh Sweatshop Workers Need Saving? Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era." *Feminist Review* 91, 2009:154-174. Indeed, unlike most other federations, BIGUF does not support pressing for duty free access of Bangladeshi garments to the US, for instance.

10. The United States has turned out to be an unexpected site of ethnographic observation of the garment industry in Bangladesh. In the last two years, I have attended and spent time with Nazma Akter at a two day long workshop on the future of the garment industry at New York University's Stern School of Business, found myself translating for the current president of BIGUF, Namita Nath, at a Washington DC event organized by the International Labor Rights Forum, interviewed Kalpona Akhter during a lunch break at a New York conference to which she had been flown in by the South Asia Solidarity Initiative (SASI) and listened to survivors of Rana Plaza promoting the Accord at a Students Against Sweatshops event at New York University.

11. Trade unionists routinely face physical intimidation and legal harassment through being charged with false cases. The BCWS has even had its license temporarily revoked by the NGO bureau. However, the abduction of Aminul Islam was somewhat unusual and perhaps reflected the political environment of the time, in which extrajudicial killings and disappearance of political rivals was routine.